

## Chapter 4

# Epistemic Vices in Public Debate: The Case of ‘New Atheism’

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**Abstract** Critics often complain that the ‘new atheists’ are arrogant, dogmatic, closed-minded and so on. Those terms denote ‘epistemic (or intellectual) vices’, or vices of the mind, so we can call those criticisms ‘vice charges’. Although they are very common, it is unclear whether they are merely rhetorical or whether they are substantive criticisms. The aim of this chapter is therefore to offer a framework for articulating and assessing these charges. I offer such a framework and consider two specific vices—arrogance and dogmatism—and ask, in each case, whether new atheists are vulnerable to a charge of vice. My conclusions are that: vice-charges are far more complex than critics appreciate; that critics can, at the least, say that certain new atheists may well be vulnerable to certain charges of epistemic vice; and that much more work needs to be done before one can charge new atheists with vices in a fair and robust way.

**Keywords** Arrogance • Dogmatism • Epistemic vice • New atheism • Virtue epistemology

The cluster of writers known as the ‘New Atheists’ have been subjected to many different forms of criticism during their relatively brief history. These range from the adequacy of their historical understanding to the poverty of their conception of a religious life: for instance, of their ‘profound unfamiliarity with the traditions, beliefs, and culture ... richness and complexity [and] historical context’ of the religious traditions that they engage with (Dickson 2010, 53). There is now a vibrant publishing industry devoted to the articulation and assessment of these various critical charges—including, of course, this volume—and the issues are also rehearsed in radio and television shows, blogs and other online fora, and elsewhere.

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51

Certainly the usual criticisms made of the New Atheists are well known—for instance, that they are historically naive, philosophically unsophisticated, theologically confused—and many critics emphasize the ramified character of these problems. In this chapter, my concern is with a set of criticisms that, though quite familiar, are surprisingly neglected in the literature on the New Atheists: that the New Atheists typically evince negative character traits, or vices, such as arrogance, dogmatism, and closed-mindedness. Of course the invocation of vices in the context of criticisms of New Atheism is hardly surprising—the title that *Prospect* magazine gave to its review of *The God Delusion* was ‘Dawkins the dogmatist’ (Brown 2006).

But although such vice charges are practically *de rigeur*, they have enjoyed much less scholarly appraisal. It is one thing to complain that Dawkins is a dogmatist, but quite another to actually articulate this as a robust and defensible form of criticism—if, indeed, such complaints are meant to be more than merely reactive rhetoric. It is easy to charge someone with arrogance, but quite another thing to actually cash this out in a properly procedural way—something that a reasonable critic owes to the person they are criticising. My aim in this chapter is therefore to articulate and assess the vice charge as deployed as a form of criticism of the New Atheists, and to do this I will appeal to the resources of virtue epistemology, an emerging area of philosophy whose concern is with the epistemic virtues and their associated vices. I do not claim here that the New Atheists *are* epistemically vicious or that they are virtuous: my aim is to demonstrate the complexity of the practice of charging people with epistemic vices and show that it is much harder to make properly robust charges of vice than many critics who talk of the ‘arrogance’ and ‘dogmatism’ of the New Atheism suppose.

#### 4.1 Virtue Epistemology and the Virtues and Vices of the Mind

The starting point of virtue epistemology is the perception of important relationships between enquiry and character. The term ‘enquiry’ should be understood broadly to refer to those activities involved in the acquisition, assessment, and application of knowledge—and so might include juridical deliberation, studying ancient texts, or arguing about the quickest route home. The term ‘character’ refers to a person’s characteristics: stable dispositions to adopt certain forms of behaviour, of either a positive or a negative character—for instance, to be either aggressive or charitable when engaging in the epistemic practice of criticising others. In philosophical parlance, negative character traits are *vices* and positive character traits are *virtues*, and an ambition of virtue epistemology is to explore the relationships between character and enquiry. As one leading virtue epistemologist explains, enquiry makes ‘certain fairly generic demands on us as cognitive agents, and ... the possession of different clusters of epistemic virtues equips us to meet or overcome these demands’ (Baehr 2011, 18). In practice, this involves identifying a range of

different epistemic virtues and vices—such as curiosity and humility, arrogance and dogmatism—and exploring how they affect a person or group’s capacity to acquire, assess, and apply knowledge through epistemic practices like theorising, debating, and investigating. Some virtues, like truthfulness, may have a universal scope within human life, whereas others, like epistemic courage, apply only to certain agents in certain conditions (see Baehr 2011, Chap. 1; Roberts and Wood 2007, Chap. 2–5). The epistemic vices are negative epistemic character traits. Familiar ones includes arrogance and dogmatism, upon which I focus, but also less familiar ones, such as epistemic injustice and epistemic insensibility. Heather Battaly (2014) distinguishes two main concepts of epistemic vice which explain what is objectionable about them: a *reliabilist* argues that the vices of the mind are character traits that have bad epistemic effects (inattentiveness leads a person to fail to notice or ‘attend to’ important aspects of a situation or pieces of information, say) while a *responsibilist* argues that the vices reflect a bad psychology (an epistemically cowardly person does not assign to truth a high enough value, so keeps their mouth shut when they ought to speak out). I think that vice-charges can use either a reliabilist or a responsibilist concept of vice, but the distinction matters: if the New Atheists are indeed epistemically vicious, it might be by virtue of the bad effects of their conduct, or due to their objectionable psychologies or motivations, or indeed some combination of these. The virtue epistemologist is therefore concerned to identify and individuate the range of different epistemic virtues and vices and to understand how they relate to one another and contribute to enquiry at both the individual and the group level (see Cassam 2016).<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, then, my aim is to use virtue epistemology to articulate and assess the vice charge as directed against New Atheism. I make four related claims. First, that virtue epistemology can help provide a normative basis for the vice charge and so to indicate that it can elevate a rhetorical device into a robust form of criticism. Second, to make good on this claim by offering case studies of the vices of epistemic arrogance and epistemic dogmatism and to suggest that, at least in the case of these two, a robust vice charge could be provided. Third, to rebut an objection to my claim that a robust vice charge could be a legitimate style of criticism: namely, that a vice charge is an *ad hominem* attack. It emerges that robust forms of charges of epistemic arrogance and epistemic dogmatism could be directed against the New Atheists, even if securing that charge in a suitably documentary manner is beyond the scope of this chapter. The chapter closes by sketching out further ways of developing the vice charge by integrating virtue epistemology with sociological studies of New Atheism.

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<sup>1</sup> Battaly (2016) identifies a third position – ‘personalism’ – according to which a person can come to possess epistemic vices (and virtues) without their being responsible for doing so. If so, even if the New Atheists are epistemically vicious, they need not be responsible for being so – a consideration that those who deploy vice charges against them should carefully consider.

## 4.2 New Atheism and Epistemic Vices

Since the vice charge is often tacitly present in the writings of both advocates and critics of New Atheism it is important to spell out what a properly robust vice charge would entail. One thing is to specify the concept of epistemic vice at work, whether reliabilist or responsibilist, since these give different but not necessarily incompatible accounts of the *wrong* of epistemic vice. Another, on which I focus here, is to specify the *form* of the charge. (A fuller account of the practice of vice-charging is given in Kidd 2016).

It is important to distinguish *explicit* from *implicit* forms of the vice charge. An explicit vice charge is one that deploys a vocabulary of virtues and vices for critical purposes; for instance when Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (2007, xii) challenge the ‘total dogmatic conviction of correctness’ and the perceived ‘resistan[ce] to the calibration of his own certainties’ that, in their judgement, characterizes both Dawkins’ writings and public statements. It is easy enough to identify other examples of explicit vice charges directed against the New Atheists that invoke epistemic vices— of their being, *inter alia*, ‘contemptuous’ (Lennox 2011, 187), ‘hubristic’ (Beattie 2007, 148), and ‘intolerant’ (Haught 2008, 10). But a vice charge can also be implicit in the descriptive and evaluative language that is used to describe the New Atheists character, tone, rhetoric, statements, or views; an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, entitled ‘Aggressive Atheists’, decried the tendency of the New Atheists to ‘pour scorn upon religious belief’ and to offer nothing but ‘hostility to religion’ (Bunting 2011). Other examples of implicit vice charges might include the suggestion that the programmatic aims of New Atheism can be understood in terms of various ‘reductions’—of the ‘cultural role of theology’, say, or ‘the meaning of faith to mindless belief’—that could easily be interpreted as reflecting epistemic vices (Haught 2008, 38).

The vice charge can therefore take implicit and explicit forms, and it will generally be easier to critically assess a vice charge when it takes more explicit forms—for then it becomes easier to identify the particular vices being invoked and to begin the philosophical task of determining whether the critic can provide a defensible account of them.

The subjects of a vice charge—in this case, New Atheists—of course usually reject the vice charge. The rejection of a vice charge may be a default response, but it may be the result of decision and deliberation, and in these cases analysis of the response can be instructive. For instance, if a person rejects the charge that they are arrogant, it is often possible to identify how they are tacitly conceiving that vice, and this opens up the possibility of critically assessing that conception. Dawkins, for instance, has argued that the ‘God Hypothesis’ is not ‘dogmatic’ because it is a ‘scientific hypothesis’, and so can be ‘analysed ... sceptically’ in a way that religious beliefs cannot be (Dawkins 2006, 24). In this case, Dawkins rejects the charge of dogmatism on the grounds that certain features of the epistemology of scientific enquiry are intrinsically anti-dogmatic—and this is a case that can be subjected to critical scrutiny. If Dawkins is right, what seems like vigorous dogmatism is, in fact,

a robust sort of epistemic confidence. Similarly Dale McGowan has challenged the vice charge, by arguing that atheists, in fact, tend to be ‘humble’, ‘open’, and ‘relentlessly, exhaustively honest’ owing to their enlightened intellectual sensibilities (quoted in Nall 2010, 193). McGowan rejects the vice charge by invoking several virtues, and this opens up the possibility of defining and debating both the charge and the response.

The vice charge can therefore take both implicit and explicit forms and careful attention to the specifics of the charge and of the responses to it by New Atheists can be critically instructive. It also indicates a clear role for virtue and vice epistemology, and especially for what Jason Baehr calls ‘applied virtue epistemology’, which studies how epistemic virtues and vices operate in specific domains, such as science, education, media, and the law (Baehr 2011, 201).

It should also be clear that the vice charge is not isolated from the other forms of criticism that are directed at the New Atheists. Since a core virtue epistemological conviction is that character and enquiry are intimately related, this is just what one would expect. A person’s vices will, after all, inform and shape how they engage with other enquirers, how they respond to certain ideas, and so on—what one might call their *epistemic conduct*. In the case of New Atheism, the vice charge relates to two wider sets of complaints commonly made by their critics.

The first is a *cognitive complaint*—that the New Atheists tend to produce and operate with accounts of, say, the history of science or the nature of religious belief that are confused, insufficiently sophisticated, or intellectually questionable. A commonly cited example is Dawkins’ definition of faith as ‘blind trust, in the absence of faith’ that is grounded in a ‘process of non-thinking’ (Dawkins 1976, 192). Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath have objected that this definition is not only unfamiliar to Christian theology, but also an obviously self-serving one that Dawkins has ‘invented to suit his own polemical purposes’ by defining those with religious faith as necessarily ‘deluded’ (McGrath and McGrath 2007, 17–18).<sup>2</sup> Self-serving definitions are objectionable partly due to their partisan character, partly due to their incapacity to sustain intellectual debate, and partly due to their lack of serious engagement with the enormous academic literature (psychological, philosophical, theological) on topics, such as the nature of faith, with which any serious critic ought to be conversant, especially if one’s ambition is, like that of the New Atheists, to provide critiques of religion. The emphasis upon the need for engagement with the academic scholarship of course also applies to those religious persons who wish to inform and guide public debate on science, religion, and society.

The second broad complaint against the New Atheists is a *conduct complaint*. This refers to the tendency of the New Atheists to conduct themselves, in their writings and their debates, in ways that minimize the possibilities for productive intellectual engagement. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2010) speak for many when they complain that the New Atheists are typically ‘contentious, divisive ... [,] mean-spirited [and] aggressive’ in a way that erodes the opportunities for ‘rational

<sup>2</sup>On the topic of ‘faith’ see Bishop (2010).

deliberation and exchange' (2010, 152). Richard Harries complains that the 'predominant tone ... of intellectual righteousness' that characterizes the stylistic and rhetorical features of New Atheist writings tends to impede debate (2010, xi). McGrath and McGrath offer a blunter statement of the conduct complaint in their remark that it was difficult to write a response to *The God Delusion*, 'an aggregation of convenient factoids suitably overstated to achieve maximum impact and loosely arranged to suggest that they constitute an argument' (2007, 13). Although no vices are stated here, the features of the book that the McGraths complain about—such as rhetorical overstatement and argumentative disorganization—are all symptomatic of epistemic vices (for example, a truthful person does not overstate or exaggerate). The collective result of the forms of epistemic conduct generally employed by the New Atheists is that the possibility of 'calm, rational debate' is increasingly minimized (Elsdon-Baker 2009, 2). Indeed, a mature debate is partly defined in terms of its participants' adoption of the appropriate stances, attitude, and tone—that is, of a certain form of epistemic conduct defined in terms of epistemic virtues.

The cognitive and conduct complaints converge in the worry that the New Atheists are generally resistant to intellectual engagement owing to the inadequacies of their knowledge and understanding of the relevant issues and the rhetorics and behaviours that characterize their conduct. Or put another way, they get too much wrong and are needlessly difficult to talk to, and these two complaints are directly related to the vice charge. A dogmatic person will persist with certain preferred concepts and theories despite legitimate objections from other enquirers; an arrogant person will assert the superiority of their own interpretations despite the availability of alternatives that they ought to recognize as plausible—and so on. Such vices can encourage an aggressively adversarial stance that presupposes the cognitive inadequacies of one's opponents in a way that excludes the possibility of constructive dialogue with them. If the vices become increasingly entrenched, the vicious person can become effectively closed off to opportunities for criticism, correction, and instruction, and so ceases to be an effective participant in collective enquiry. And if this is so, then the vice charge is doing real critical work, for charges of arrogance and dogmatism cease to be incidental asides—rhetorical icing on the argumentative cake—but a legitimate form of criticism that focuses on the correlations between the epistemic character of the New Atheists and the content of the cognitive and conduct complaints.

Such a critical strategy sounds promising, but it is premised upon the provision of robust accounts of the vices that are being called into play. It is easy—too easy, in fact—to exchange charges of arrogance or dogmatism, and this encourages the sense that the critical practice of charging others with vice is mere rhetoric. A vice charge will, after all, falter in the absence of a philosophically articulated account of the vice in question, and so to make a robust vice charge a critic should be able to provide those accounts. The aim of this chapter is to make good on these claims on behalf of the legitimacy of directing a vice charge against the New Atheists. In the next two sections I offer accounts of the vices of *epistemic arrogance* and *epistemic dogmatism*, respectively, including the sorts of conduct they will typically manifest in. This is followed by a consideration of an objection to the critical practice of vice



charging that will both clarify some of its features and secure its status as a legitimate form of criticism. It emerges that New Atheists are indeed vulnerable to the specific charges of epistemic arrogance and epistemic dogmatism—as critics have suspected. But whether those charges can be made to stick is one that it is not yet possible to determine, in advance of the provision of genuinely robust vice charges.

### 4.3 Epistemic Arrogance

In this section, I provide an account of the vice of epistemic arrogance inspired by the work of Roberts and Wood (2007). That vice consists in a disposition to draw illicit inferences to entitlements and exemptions whose consequence is the violation and erosion of the epistemic norms that regulate collective enquiry. I aim to show that it is plausible to argue that the New Atheists are typically guilty of epistemic arrogance.

The success of enquiry depends upon the fact that the participants will know and observe the appropriate norms of epistemic conduct. These epistemic norms are like social norms in that they facilitate collective activity by establishing shared standards of conduct—prescribing certain forms of behaviour, proscribing others—in a way that minimizes conflict and maximizes cooperation (see Pritchard 2010, Chap. 5). There are many epistemic norms of varying degrees of complexity and specificity, but a useful illustrative example is the ‘principle of charity’: the requirement that a person should seek to maximize the truth or rationality of what other persons think and say—for instance, by charitably interpreting imperfections in the verbal articulation of a claim as an indicator of anxiety rather than inability. This is an epistemic norm because it will tend to establish social conditions—in the classroom or at a conference—that are maximally conducive to enquiry, for instance by encouraging participants to freely advance tentative claims or speculative ideas without fear of instant critical retribution (see Gauker 1986).

Although such epistemic norms are—like social norms—often violated, this is not always a bad thing because situations can be imagined in which the strict observance of certain norms may in fact compromise or undermine enquiry.<sup>3</sup> So the claim is not that observing epistemic norms will *always* be good for enquiry nor that enquiry will *always* succeed if one does observe them, for the reason that the success or failure of enquiry is contingent upon a complex range of factors, many of which will be beyond the knowledge or control of the epistemic agents involved. Instead, the claim is that the observance of epistemic norms will typically be conducive to enquiry and that their suspension or violation should therefore be the result of careful deliberation rather than being part of intellectual business-as-usual. The term ‘norm’, after all, indicates something that will in the majority of typical cases be efficacious and therefore to be respected, rather than subjected to arbitrary suspension or violation. It is a social norm that one should not interrupt a person while they are speaking—for to do so is rudeness, a vice—but it is, of course, permissible

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<sup>3</sup> A classic defence of this claim is Feyerabend (1975).

to violate that norm if the interruption is required to warn the speaker of some imminent danger. An important feature of a good enquirer is therefore the skill of knowing when to respect a norm, and to what degree, and when to suspend or violate it, and to be willing and able to account for their decisions to do so. Such a person has what Aristotle called ‘practical wisdom’ (*phronesis*).<sup>4</sup>

A person who suspends or violates epistemic norms in an arbitrary or unjustifiable manner threatens the possibility of productive collective enquiry in one or both of two ways. First, they will tend to undermine the social conditions of enquiry; for instance, by creating a hostile environment that discourages the sorts of tentative speculation that is often helpful in debates about new and unfamiliar topics. The members of a community in which the principle of charity is not observed will likely find it difficult to offer incomplete or inarticulate ideas because they know that their peers cannot be relied upon to help bring them into a state of completion or articulacy. Second, prolonged instances of the arbitrary suspension and violation of epistemic norms will tend to erode the status of those norms and gradually undermine the integrity of the relevant community. Norms can, of course, survive occasional suspension or violation in cases where there is good reason—as a calculated bet that paid off, say—or where the violation was arbitrary but incidental and ‘one off’, for instance as a result of the tolerable immaturity of a junior or inexperienced colleague. But when epistemic norms are subjected to sustained and deliberate abuse the result is that they will begin to break down, and, gradually, systematic damage will be done to both the social conditions of enquiry and the integrity of the system of norms upon which enquiry depends.<sup>5</sup>

With this account of the role of epistemic norms in place, I can explain how they relate to the vice of epistemic arrogance—and therefore to the New Atheists. There are several accounts of the vice of arrogance in its ethical and epistemic forms available in the philosophical literature, but the following discussion will rely upon that offered by the virtue epistemologists Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood (2007). They argue that epistemic arrogance ought to be understood as a ‘motivated disposition to infer illicitly some entitlement from one’s superiority to others’, for instance by judging oneself to be entitled to privileged status, treatment, or rights by virtue of their intellectual or social superiority (2007, 77). What makes this an epistemic vice is the fact that the entitlements claimed are epistemic in character; that is, pertaining to knowledge, understanding, and enquiry.

These inferences could be made implicitly or explicitly, such that a person can be un-self-consciously arrogant, not least since a psychological feature of arrogance is that it often ‘functions as a barrier to the arrogant person’s acquiring information from others’ (Tiberius and Walker 1998, 383). We might therefore distinguish

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<sup>4</sup>The concept of *phronesis* is central to Aristotle’s ethics; a classic statement is *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 5, 1,144b.

<sup>5</sup>A good example of social norms and the integrity of communities is Robert K. Merton’s classic studies in the sociology of science—see, e.g., Merton (1938). It is interesting that his work was motivated by a sense of ‘active hostility to science’ from certain quarters of his society—the same perception that informs the New Atheists now.



between different forms of arrogance: a person who is oblivious to the fact of their arrogance but who would, if challenged, be open to correction is *weakly arrogant*, whereas a person who is conscious of their arrogance and would retain it even if challenged is *strongly arrogant*. Those two positions of course mark the end points of a spectrum, and Roberts and Wood are correct in their judgment that it is the strongly arrogant persons who really merit the label of ‘arrogance’—for their arrogance incorporates a ‘certain resistance to correction’ (2007, 245–246). The difficulty is to persuade people that they are being *arrogant*, rather than, say, *strongly committed* or *robustly confident*.<sup>6</sup>

The epistemically arrogant person is therefore characterized by a disposition to draw illicit privileges, which can be grouped into two kinds: *entitlements* and *exemptions* (see Roberts and Wood 2007, 243–244ff). Strictly speaking, the latter is a sub-set of the former, but there is exegetical value in distinguishing them from one another. An *inference to entitlement* can take many forms, such as supposing oneself to be entitled to privileges such as acting in ways that one would ordinarily be denied; or the right to access or occupy positions of social or intellectual authority which are typically conditional upon the attainment of qualifications or experiences; or to an enhanced degree of priority or power within a given community or activity—like debating a complex issue at a conference—despite competing claims by one’s peers. In each of these sorts of cases, the epistemically arrogant person preemptively judges themselves to be entitled to certain privileges, powers, and priority for which they lack proper warrant—they overstep themselves or “act above their station.” Moreover, the arrogant person fails to fulfil the requirements of what Philip Quadrio (this volume) calls the ‘role morality of the scholar’—for a dogmatic, reactionary scholar who fails to recognize or observe the rules of academic enquiry and engagement compromises their authority.

An *inference to exemption* involves the arrogant person supposing that they are exempted from certain requirements or constraints that do, in fact, apply to them. An arrogant person might, for instance, suppose themselves to be exempted from certain practices or procedures that apply to all epistemic agents (e.g. having their journal papers peer reviewed); or supposing themselves to be exempted from the need to respect the authority of experts in a given field (e.g. by dismissing the views of acknowledged authorities on a given topic); or judging themselves to be competent to discourse confidently on topics despite not having the requisite knowledge and understanding—what some call ‘grandstanding.’ Although these examples are far from exhaustive, they indicate the different ways in which an arrogant person can illicitly and illegitimately exempt themselves from requirements and standards that, in fact, do apply to them.

Such inferences to entitlement and to exemption can have a range of negative social and epistemic consequences. A short list might include provoking anger, frustration, or discomfort; or by interfering with the process of enquiry; or by setting a bad professional and pedagogical example to undergraduate and postgraduate stu-

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<sup>6</sup>I develop this problem by distinguishing the *definition* and the *exemplification* of epistemic vice in Kidd (2016, §6).

dents; or by requiring members of the relevant epistemic community to enact disciplinary procedures in order to censure or interdict the arrogant person (see Reznik 1998, Chap. 4–5). But a deeper consequence of such arrogant behaviour is that it can, especially in intense and prolonged cases, gradually erode the epistemic norms that govern the relevant epistemic community, most obviously the norms that regulate the allocation of epistemic entitlement and exemptions. In the short term, such norm violation may be irritating but only minimally disruptive, especially if the violators are quickly identified and interdicted by sharp-eyed chairs of conference panels or vigilant journal referees. In the long term, however, such sustained arrogant behaviour can become increasingly disruptive and place increasing pressure upon the norms, those who attempt to respect and enforce them, and those who are charged with protecting and enforcing them. Such norms, after all, only continue to exist insofar as they are recognized and enforced by the members of a given community.

The vice of epistemic arrogance is, then, a disposition to draw illicit inferences to entitlements and exemptions whose consequence is the violation of the epistemic norms that govern and grant integrity to a community of enquirers. The question of whether the New Atheists are epistemically arrogant can now be asked, though my aim is not to offer a definitive answer—too big a task for a single chapter—but rather to secure the more modest claim that the answer is likely to be in the affirmative.

On my analysis, the New Atheists are vulnerable to a charge of epistemic arrogance for at least two reasons. The first is that it is easy to identify in the writings and statements of the New Atheists plausible examples of the sorts of illicit inferences to entitlement and exemption that characterize epistemic arrogance. Their tendency to establish and assert conceptions of the nature of religious faith without consultation of the relevant theological, philosophical, and social scientific literature can now be reinterpreted as epistemic arrogance: specifically, entitlement to hold forth on faith. Another example is the reliance of the New Atheists on an historical account of the relationship between science and religion that historians call the Conflict Model (see Cantor and Kenny 2001). Such a model has obvious rhetorical and polemical value for the New Atheists, but historians of science and religion are quick to emphasize two important points. First, the Conflict Model is *one* model of that historical relationship amongst others, and that its merits over those alternatives must be argued for. Indeed, the other models have names like ‘Independence,’ ‘Dialogue,’ and ‘Integration.’ Second, the Conflict Model is deeply suspect: it is ‘hackneyed but popular’ (Dixon 2010, 1), ‘serve[s] polemical rather than analytical purposes’ (Turner 2010, 88), obscures the ‘variety and complexity’ of the science-religion relationship (Lindberg 2010, 34)—to cite just three distinguished historians of science. Third, the task of developing and debating the relationship between science and religion requires careful and disciplined historical skill and historiographical sensitivity, and none of the New Atheists typically evince either. This is evident enough from their reliance on various ‘myths’ about science and religion, several of which are refuted in a recent book entitled *Galileo Goes To Jail and Other Myths*

*About Science and Religion* (Numbers 2009). Given the importance of historical narratives to the polemical and critical strategies of the New Atheists, these attitudes towards the discipline and the practitioners of the history of science are unfortunate. Still, it is clear enough that many of the claims that the New Atheists make about the historical relationship of science and religion can only be sustained if they exempt themselves from the scholarly obligation to take seriously the deliverances of the relevant community of historians.

The second reason why the New Atheists are vulnerable to a charge of epistemic arrogance is that they tend to adopt self-images that encourage a sense of their own superlative intellectual ability and integrity. It is a common New Atheist claim that atheism is a form of rationally impeccable intellectual stance—hence an allied rhetoric of ‘Brights’ and ‘freethinkers’—who are uncorrupted by the biases and prejudices that, they allege, are the fuel of irrationalism, superstition, and religious belief. On this view, it is only atheists who possess the ‘courage to face the universe in the light of reason’, free from subordination to ‘religious authority’ and a ‘supernatural creator’ (Kurtz 1997, 37). Only atheists, says Dawkins, resist the religious invitation to ‘evade the need to think and to evaluate evidence’ and so to achieve intellectual responsibility (1976, 198). Such self-images of New Atheism are designed to attribute to them various honorific features, including intellectual responsibility, immunity to bias, and moral courage. This, in turn, introduces into New Atheist self-images a structural tendency towards epistemic arrogance: for self-attribution of intellectual and moral superiority provides the necessary basis for the illicit inferral of entitlements and exemptions that is a precondition for epistemic arrogance. Such self-images are, then, structurally vulnerable to epistemic arrogance (see Jones and Martin 2004).

The charge of epistemic arrogance against the New Atheists is therefore likely to succeed given that the three core components—*sense of superiority*, *entitlement-inferal*, and *exemption-inferal*—are all present in New Atheist self-images, and in their demonstrated behaviours and attitudes. Given that the New Atheists have persisted in their sense of superiority and their dispositions of inferal, it is plausible to argue that they are *strongly arrogant*, and even if one demurs, then at least a working basis for articulating and assessing that charge is now in place.

#### 4.4 Epistemic Dogmatism

Another vice with which the New Atheists are typically charged is *dogmatism*. In this section, I offer an account of the vice of epistemic dogmatism, again based on the account offered by Roberts and Wood, and use it to make plausible the claim that the New Atheists are vulnerable to a charge of epistemic dogmatism.

There are different possible bases for an objection to dogmatism, but a common complaint is that it impairs a person’s capacity to engage in foundational epistemic

practices (these being the sorts of practices that are essential to epistemic life). Two such foundational epistemic practices are *instruction* and *criticism*: the former involves the imparting of epistemic goods, like skills and knowledge, to others, and the latter refers to the modification or rejection of claims, arguments, and conclusions that a person is either contemplating or has accepted. Each of these practices can, of course, take many different forms. Instruction can be formal or informal, active or passive, and might range from self-directed learning, reading books and blogs, listening to lectures, studying for degrees, undertaking academic research, and so on. Criticism might also range from self-reflexive assessment of one's beliefs, formalized critical debate with teachers or peers, invitations by others to clarify certain concepts that one uses, or the offering of explicit objections to conclusions that one has drawn. Often these two broad forms of epistemic practice converge, for instance if a teacher decides to criticize a student's confidently jingoistic claims about the merits of British imperialism by acquainting them with certain facts about the deleterious effects it had upon aboriginal peoples in the former colonial territories. (One might suppose that a good teacher is one able to appreciate what forms of instruction and criticism are appropriate).

It is likely that most forms of epistemic activity, whether convivial coffee shop conversations about capitalism or high-level academic disputes about causality, will involve a complex cluster of simultaneous practices of instruction and of criticism. An obvious precondition, though, for successful participation in practices of instruction and of criticism is that a person can respond appropriately to those persons—such as teachers or peers—who are offering the instruction and criticism. Many educationalists have in fact argued that a foundational aim of education is the cultivation of a mature intellectual character; for instance, a student who is able to restrain unreflective responses to problems posed and to patiently and diligently consider alternative views, and so on (see Baehr 2015; Kotzee 2013). The American philosopher of education, John Dewey, argued that a primary purpose of education is the development, in the student, of a capacity for 'trained reflection,' such that they become careful and considered in their judgements and responses, and so 'free from routine and ... caprice' (1998, 67–68). A student with these qualities and virtues will of course be more receptive to instruction by, and critical engagement with, other enquirers and so would be an effective participant in collective enquiry. I suggest that epistemic dogmatism can be understood—at least in part—as an entrenched incapacity of certain persons to respond appropriately to attempts by others at instruction and criticism.

Once again, Roberts and Wood offer a robust account of the vice of epistemic dogmatism, which they identify as a specific form of 'epistemic rigidity'. The epistemically dogmatic person has a 'disposition to respond irrationally to oppositions' to certain of their beliefs (2007, 195). These irrational responses can, of course, take very many forms, but they would include the following: failing to respond in appropriately rational ways to criticism and objection (e.g. sneering or ridiculing; being fatuous or hyperbolic); insistently polarising subtly nuanced views; ignoring or dismissing criticisms in a derogatory manner; deliberately exaggerating or distorting the criticisms directed against them; adopting an accusatory and aggressive stance

that fails to respect reasonable social and epistemic norms—to offer just a few. These forms of dogmatic behaviour are often awkward and unpleasant, but of course they will tend to have negative epistemic consequences; for instance, the dogmatist 'turns wilfully away from insights into the force of his interlocutor's objections', and instead 'calls to his aid arguments that he knows or half-knows to be dodges' (Roberts and Wood 2007, 195). In such cases, debate is therefore impaired rather than advanced, as bad arguments—or historical 'myths'—are predictably repeated while good ones are ignored and dismissed (see Kidd 2015, 2017).

It is worth noting that, though Roberts and Wood characterize dogmatism in terms of irrational responsiveness to criticism, their account works very well for instruction, too. The reason is that the distinction between criticism and instruction is, as argued earlier, hardly a sharp one; many practices of criticism necessarily involve some degree of instruction, since people often get things wrong—and so invite criticism—when their knowledge or understanding is deficient. A dogmatist may therefore be prone to interpret efforts by others to instruct them as forms of criticism and so mis-respond—one can challenge criticisms, but one ought not challenge an offer of information that one lacks but needs.

Characterising dogmatism in terms of a disposition to irrationally respond to criticism and instruction makes it easier to determine whether a person is being viciously dogmatic or virtuously self-confident, for two reasons. First, it is generally easier to judge what an irrational response to a critic or instructor might be because social and epistemic communities typically have well-established formal and informal norms of interpersonal engagement; that is, of appropriate forms of epistemic conduct. Second, Roberts and Wood emphasize that a robust charge of dogmatism should be grounded in a '[l]ong and detailed acquaintance' with the character and conduct of the object of the charge, including the 'mental strategies' that they typically employ (2007, 195–196). A charge of dogmatism cannot be justified by a single instance of epistemic bad behaviour, since that might be the result of other non-culpable factors—such as insomnia, illness, or acute stress—not least because charging someone with vice based on a generalized inferal from a few instances may, itself, be epistemically vicious.

The vice of epistemic dogmatism can therefore be understood as a disposition to respond irrationally to attempts by others to offer instruction and criticism, and this vice renders a person increasingly resistant to epistemic engagement. It is easy enough to sketch out the conduct of a dogmatic person: they cannot be relied upon to offer mature and reasoned responses to their critics; they resort to dismissals, polemics, and ridicule; they create an uncomfortable social and epistemic environment and generate tensions and conflict; and they therefore undermine collective enquiry. But Roberts and Wood also add that a dogmatic person has a further feature, a 'positive counterface,' in the form of a 'compulsion to recruit others to one's position' (2007, 195). A person who is dogmatically convinced of the superlative maturity and sophistication of their beliefs and convictions, whatever they might be, could of course quite naturally feel that they are compelled to convert individuals or groups with alternative beliefs and convictions. The foregoing account offers a set

of criteria by which one can determine whether or not the New Atheists are vulnerable to a robust charge of epistemic dogmatism, and my suggestion is that they are.

First, the New Atheists do evince the disposition to offer irrational responses to criticism and instruction that Roberts and Wood identify as a characteristic of epistemic dogmatism. A familiar example is their persisting tendency to derogate religious persons as being, in Dawkins' words, 'victims' of a 'mind-virus' (2006, 216–218ff), or when Sam Harris describes Christian theology as the 'story of bookish men' promulgating 'moral pretences' (2011, 5, 48).<sup>7</sup> The obvious polemical value of such pejorative rhetoric can be taken, by a critic, as a reflection of the epistemically arrogant disposition to respond irrationally to the attempts at instruction and criticism of religious persons, philosophers, and theologians. And it should be clear that the task of understanding the nature of a religious life is a difficult one, even for the epistemically virtuous.<sup>8</sup>

Second, many core New Atheist convictions and beliefs, such as that of the cognitive immaturity of religious belief and the vacuity of theistic metaphysics, are liable to encourage irrational responses to religious persons and traditions. Certain beliefs and self-images can encourage epistemic vices, and Fern Elsdon-Baker has argued that the dogmatic aspects of Dawkins' New Atheism is grounded partly in his 'representation of the history and philosophy of science' (2009, 178). For not only is that representation inaccurate and incomplete, but it is appealed to in order to justify the dogmatic derogation of religious persons: if one subscribes to the myth that science has been busily eroding the moral and epistemic credibility of religion since the seventeenth century, then an urge to dismiss and derogate religious persons in the early twenty-first century can seem eminently justified.

Third, the New Atheists often demonstrate the 'compulsion to recruit' that Roberts and Wood suggested is the positive counterface to epistemic dogmatism. Some New Atheists express this compulsion negatively, as when Dawkins includes, as an appendix to *The God Delusion*, a 'partial list of friendly addresses for those needing support in escaping from religion' (2006, 421–427). Others can express that compulsion positively, as Dennett does in explicitly aligning himself with the 'Brights', a group with self-attributively emancipatory ambitions (for instance, the establishment of a secular humanist society). These different forms of positive and negative recruitment strategies—of praising New Atheism and its allies, or derogating religious forms of life—of course pull together, but when coupled to the pattern of irrational responses, the 'fit' with Roberts and Wood's account of epistemic dogmatism is noteworthy. It is, then, plausible to argue that the New Atheists are vulnerable to a charge of epistemic dogmatism, although, to repeat an earlier caveat, securing this charge is a task for another time.

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<sup>7</sup> While this may seem like I am singling out Dawkins, the reader is invited to find counterpoints in the writings of other New Atheists. Indeed, this is how the claims are to be tested.

<sup>8</sup> I detail some of the epistemological and phenomenological difficulties of understanding the nature of religious lives in Kidd (2013) and (2014).



## 4.5 An Objection

I have offered a way of articulating the vice charges directed against New Atheists that uses the resources of virtue epistemology. To actually appraise those charges is a job for another time, but one thing a budding vice charger must do is respond to an obvious objection to the practice. Call it the *ad hominem* objection.

The *ad hominem* objection goes as follows: the vice charge is an *ad hominem* attack that attempts to undermine a person’s claims by attacking their character, and so is guilty of the fallacy of irrelevance (see Walton 1998). It is good epistemic practice—so the objection goes—to judge claims and arguments on their own merits, rather than by criticising the moral or intellectual qualities of the person who advances or defends them. If so, then critics of New Atheism ought to focus on the claims and argument of *New Atheism* rather than directing vice charges at particular *New Atheists*—so even if Dawkins does turn out to be dogmatic, that does not indicate that he is wrong in his claims about science and religion. A person can dogmatically defend views that are quite true, even if one dislikes the tone or manner or style in which they are articulated and defended.

The *ad hominem* objection can be rebutted if one can demonstrate that, in certain cases at least, critical appraisal of a person’s character is, in fact directly relevant to assessment of their arguments, beliefs, and claims. An effective version of this response has been developed by Heather Battaly (2010) in her argument that *ad hominem* arguments can be legitimate if they are directed at negative features of a person’s character—that is, their *vices*—that are relevant to appraisal of their epistemic performance. Battaly notes that much of our knowledge is acquired testimonially from others; this being so, certain epistemic virtues have an essential role in our reliable testimonial acquisition of knowledge from others—humility, say—and a person could therefore be criticized for lacking the virtues required to acquire knowledge from others (2010, 375). The vicious person lacks the capacities required to acquire knowledge from others in a reliable manner, and so their vice points to a deficiency in their epistemic capacities (see Aberdeen 2014).

This suggests that certain forms of *ad hominem* criticism will be illegitimate, but that, in other cases, appraisal of the features of a person’s epistemic character is directly relevant to our appraisal of them as an enquirer. In the latter case, what the vice charging critic must do is to show that the New Atheists do have certain epistemic vices and that those vices are indeed relevant to appraisals of their epistemic conduct. In the cases of arrogance and dogmatism, for instance, it would have to be shown that the New Atheists do indeed have those characteristics and that they do impair their capacity to engage in collective epistemic practice—for instance, they are neither amenable to instruction nor responsive to criticism.

Taken together, the upshot is that in *certain cases* it will be epistemically legitimate to criticize a person’s epistemic character traits, rather than, or as well as, their beliefs, arguments, and so on. But the critic has a lot of work to do to make these legitimate vice-charges: they must give robust accounts of the vices they want to invoke, explain how those vices manifest in epistemic and social conduct, and then do the careful, often painstaking work to show how and when those vices manifest

in the conduct of their target. My sense is that many vice charges against the New Atheists do not fulfil these conditions, at least as they stand, such that those charges have only a *provisional* status: they may be, but are not yet established to be, legitimate charges. It is therefore too soon to tell whether the New Atheists are indeed epistemically vicious in the ways their critics confidently maintain. But hopefully we now have one way to assess and appraise those charges and thereby test the critics' confidence.

## 4.6 Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to use the resources of virtue epistemology to articulate and assess the 'vice charge' in the context of New Atheism. It emerged that the New Atheists are indeed vulnerable to suitably robust charges of epistemic arrogance and epistemic dogmatism, and that critics who make robust vice charges are not guilty of making an *ad hominem* attack. Although it is not my claim that the New Atheists have been decisively *shown* to be epistemically arrogant and dogmatic, the analysis offered indicates that they may be *vulnerable* to such charges. Therefore, those critics who want to argue that the New Atheists are epistemically vicious must therefore work harder to provide properly robust charges against them; otherwise, their charges of arrogance and dogmatism remain at a merely rhetorical level, and risk being guilty of fallacious *ad hominem* attacks.

It should be clear, too, that if a robust vice charge can be directed at the New Atheists, then we can point to two implications for public debate about science, religion, and society. One is that it will be important to develop and enforce standards and norms of *good epistemic conduct*, not least since complaints about the New Atheists often appeal to some conceptions of good conduct—of what it means to debate well, comport oneself during arguments, and so on. Another is that the point that one effective way to promote one's positions is to conduct oneself according to suitably high standards of epistemic conduct. The value of science, for instance, will be rooted not only in its predictive and explanatory power or its technological fecundity, but in the fact that it can offer an attractive *ethos* or *attitude* or *stance*, integral to which will be certain virtues, like truthfulness and integrity. Since this ideal clearly matters to the New Atheists, then virtue epistemology offers them means of developing their position.

It is worth closing by considering some further ways that virtue epistemology could be profitably integrated with sociology and other social sciences. To secure a robust charge of epistemic vice of the sort outlined in this chapter it is essential to have an empirically rich account of the typical behaviour of the target of the charge and an understanding of the social and institutional context in which those targets operate. Do the epistemic virtues of scientists and scholars differ from those of various non-expert publics? Do those publics have conceptions of good epistemic conduct and the virtues that it entails? And so on. This will require the contributions of sociology—as other chapters in this collection indicate—as well as those of history,

theology and religious studies, and other disciplines. If so, then such interdisciplinary engagement will be an important feature of the development of 'applied virtue epistemology' into the future. More generally, a willingness to acknowledge a need for other disciplines and an ability to participate in collective enquiry is a hallmark of epistemic virtue, and therefore something to be welcomed.<sup>9</sup>

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